

Chapter One

Vampires are everywhere. Lose the all-vampires-are-rich-and-powerful stereotypes. Think Mike, the night clerk at the mini-mart. Brittany, the barmaid who brings your appletini at last call. Even the night stocker at your local superstore.

And, don't freak out now, but Mike could have looked deep into your eyes and willed you to follow him to the back room. There, he could have taken you down a pint before he sent you on your way with your cigs and six pack, and you *wouldn't have a clue*.

Cool, really. Forget those telltale fang marks. We can make them disappear along with your memory. No harm, no foul. Only the most depraved vamps would suck you dry and leave you for dead. Most of us have figured out that we live longer if we're discreet.

Yes, that's right, *we, us*. I'm Gloriana Eloisa St. Claire. Glory to my friends. Did you think all vamps were

pale, thin and brooding? If only. The thin part anyway. But whatever shape or size we are when we're turned vampire, that's how we are *forever*.

Just my crappy luck that I was bloating the day I got the big V. I have curves, okay? At least that's my positive spin on things. I do what I can with what I've got. To look at me you'd think "healthy" twentysomething with a great sense of style, thank you very much. I'm blond, blue-eyed and tanned with the best spray on money can buy.

So how did I end up an older-than-dirt vampire? Long story short--a man, of course. Tall, dark and deliciously sexy. His name was and is Angus Jeremiah Campbell the third. After a little squabble with his father he changed his name to Jeremy Blade. His choice, not mine. When our paths cross, I call him "Jerry". He hates that. We've been on-again, off-again for centuries, currently off.

We met in London. Jerry was checking out the action and I was an actress at the Globe, back in the days when most female parts were played by men, and how sad is that? Anyway, I'd disgraced my family and married an actor. When he was killed in a really ugly accident with a slop jar, I'd have starved if the company hadn't let me take on some small parts. And I was good, a real actress, not one of those sluts who *called* themselves actresses. Billy Shakespeare loved me.

Then Jerry came backstage one night and the rest is history. I fell hard. Lust with a capital *L*. And, trust me, you haven't experienced the big *O* until you've gotten it on with a man's teeth in your neck. Jerry is irresistible when he wants to be. I begged him to make me vampire so we could be together forever.

If I'd only known ... Turns out the man lasted forever, the love, not so long.

At least we never married. First, he didn't want to be "tied down", then a hundred or so years later, when he decided to do me a big favor and make it legal, I'd snapped to the fact that we were talking about literally *forever* together. No way. With a sixteenth-century man? You get the picture.

And imagine the same in-laws for *centuries*. Trust me, the Campbells weren't exactly thrilled when their eldest brought home an English actress. Two strikes right there. And we were living in sin. They didn't know whether to be relieved that Jerry and I hadn't tied the knot or horrified. I eventually brought them around, but by then I'd had enough of the Scottish Highlands and their crumbling castle. The place is in the middle of *nowhere*.

I'm social. I need people, bright lights, action. So I became an even better actress, blending in, moving on every decade or so when my twentysomething looks raised some

eyebrows. That's the hard part, you know. Drifting. There's a vamp network for things like IDs so that's no problem. No, it's being rootless that gets to me.

This time I stayed longer than I should have. Even Botox and cosmetic surgery couldn't explain to my mortal friends why gravity or crow's feet hadn't caught up with me.

Yeah, I like to hang with mortals. But I have lots of vampire friends too. I've run across quite a few over the years. I can smell them and vice versa. Oh, nothing nasty, like failed deodorant. A mortal can't smell us at all, but we've got heightened senses, especially when it comes to our own kind.

Sound creepy? Get over it. Vamps can be fun, real party animals. You may be wondering how someone born in 1580 can sound so *now*. I'm an actress, remember? And addicted to HBO. I still watch *Sex and the City* reruns. The shoes! Anyway, I'm a chameleon. I can listen to people talking and within minutes I'm one of them.

Right now, I'm on the move again. I've done Vegas and was lucky enough to get a gig dancing in a revue in a small club off The Strip. Clever costuming disguised my "problem areas", but my cups runneth over if you know what I mean so I was a hit. Now the club is going to be knocked down to make way for one of those megacasinos so I decided it was

time to move on.

I'm going east this time. Austin. Yes, in Texas. I've heard it's a happening place. I've got vamp friends there, plus I've checked it out on the Net. There are the usual freaks. Vampire wannabes with dead-white skin, black lipstick and a total lack of fashion sense. But there's also a nice group of fellow vamps, including Frederick von Repsdorf. He's one of those fun vamps I told you about. He and his boyfriend live in a neat old house near the University of Texas. He e-mailed me pictures.

Okay, okay, I admit it. I heard Blade had been through there recently. What can I say? His folks are safely tucked away in the Highlands, and Blade without the baggage still floats my boat. I'm going to check it out. Austin, that is. Hills, cowboys, dot-com millionaires. Why not?

And there are opportunities for entrepreneurs. I'm not rich like a lot of vamps, including my ex. I've always had to work for a living because I'd never take a dime from Blade, then I'd be obligated. So I work. I made good money in Vegas but discovered I had a weakness for all-night poker games.

Yeah, I could have put the vamp whammy on the other players and read their minds, but I don't cheat. So I played fair, and found out I suck at poker. Enough said. A twelve-step program later and I've given up games of

chance. Another reason Austin sounds good. No legalized gambling. The closest casino is a state away.

It's close to midnight when I hug my best gal pals, shed a few tears, then take off in my 1997 Suburban pulling a twelve-foot U-Haul. I know a cute little convertible would better suit my image, but I'm a collector. Seriously. I have a lot of stuff that I drag with me wherever I go.

#

I'm just crossing the Nevada/Arizona border and singing "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina"—love those Broadway show tunes—when my cell phone rings. Caller ID unknown. I answer it anyway.

"Frederick tells me you're moving to Texas."

Blade. Who else would assume I knew who he was and dispense with pleasantries, even though I haven't seen him for four years, three months ... Oh, God, I was *not* counting.

"Keeping tabs on me, Jerry?" I could almost hear him grinding his teeth. I flashed back to the way he would stroke those bicuspid across my body ... He wasn't saying anything. I sighed. "Yes, I'm on the road as we speak. Why?"

"Gloriana, you never write. You never call."

I stared at the phone as if it had sprouted fangs. Jeremy Blade being flip?

"Who are you and what have you done with my—" I couldn't finish the thought. Our relationship was too complicated.

"Your lover? Husband?"

"Definitely not husband." Leave it to Blade to propose when I'd had it up to here with family togetherness in the Highlands. There had been some talk of a handfast, but I deny we ever did it. But about that family. Would you believe Blade has four brothers and two sisters? His folks didn't become vampire until after all the kids were born. Then Mag and Angus let their adult children decide their own future.

No one knows how Mom and Pop Campbell decided when to pose the big question. Trust me, none of the Campbell kids were retaining water on *their* V-day, the day each one got to choose—vampire and immortality, or the pitiful life span they could have expected way back then. Just my luck that's a no-brainer for the Campbell clan. You try living happily ever after with nine vampires.

"What *am* I then?"

"I call you 'my ex.' That about says it."

"You're breaking my heart, babe."

Babe? I couldn't believe my ears and, trust me, a vamp's hearing is supercharged. Supercharged enough to glom on to the hint of a Scottish burr that had melted my

resistance all those centuries ago. Nope. I was immune now.

"I can't break what doesn't exist, Jerry. Why are you calling me 'babe'?"

"I decided you were right about a few things."

That did it. I pulled off the highway and stopped the car on the shoulder. No traffic at three in the morning. And no wonder. This stretch of road wasn't exactly the scenic route. Rocks, scraggly bushes and sand. Period.

"I was right?"

"About fitting in. I've had a few skirmishes with some hunters recently."

I felt sick. Skirmishes in Bladespeak meant he'd come within inches of being staked. We all feared vampire hunters. Living forever can be depressing, but I sure didn't want to go out with a stake through my heart.

"God, Blade. What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. A new man you might say."

"Good. Because the old one ..." I didn't have the heart to ream him out like I usually did. A world without Blade. I bitch and moan, but our always interesting love-hate relationship was one of the things that kept me going.

"The old one has missed you."

Now that tore it. "*Missed* me? Please. I know for a fact that you were in Vegas less than a year ago and didn't even bother to see my show."

"You know how I feel about that show. I hope to hell you're not planning to continue exposing yourself in Texas."

I felt instantly better. I'd told Blade my show was topless. It drove him insane. "I was a dancer, Jerry. Showing a little skin earned me a nice living."

"You don't have to work at all. I'm responsible for what you are--"

"Who, not what. And I begged you to do it, so I am responsible for my condition. No one else." God, we'd had this discussion at least a thousand times. Blade was nothing if not hardheaded. And with a memory like an immortal elephant. Once, almost three hundred years ago, I'd yelled at him that he'd ruined my life, robbed me of having children, blah, blah, blah.

It was a meltdown, brought on by too much Campbell togetherness. I'd gotten over it almost immediately, but Blade seemed haunted by it. I admit the children thing was a low blow. I don't know which would be worse. To see your kids grow old and die. Or turn them vampire so they can live forever and ever and ... See? I thought about it. And I've come to terms with it. Jerry hasn't. Damn him, I would not feel *anything* for him. I took a steadying breath.

"Tell me about the hunters."

"A bad group. Led by a man named Brent Westwood. He's

a billionaire big-game hunter who has decided vampires are the biggest game of all." Blade's voice was hard. "He takes trophies, Gloriana. He wears a necklace made of ..." I heard him take a breath. A shaky breath. "Fangs."

I thought I was going to be sick. "And they call us evil?" I swallowed hard.

"There's more." Blade cleared his throat. "Be careful, Gloriana. He got MacTavish."

"Mac! No!" I leaned my head against the steering wheel. Mac had been Blade's best friend and I'd loved him like a brother. I felt tears slip down my cheeks. Yeah, vamps can cry and Mac was definitely worth a little dehydration. Mac had been light where Blade was dark, in temperament as well as looks. Funny and loyal to the core. I pressed a hand against my mouth until I could speak again.

"Mara?" Mac's wife. Beautiful. More like Blade than Mac had been, a bit on the broody side.

"She's a survivor. Sad, hurt, filled with lust for revenge. She's staying with me. Westwood got away and got a good look at both of us. I'm sure we're on the top of his list now."

I breathed through a nausea that I hadn't felt in decades. Blade's teeth dangling around a mortal fiend's neck. Not possible. Blade was too strong, too powerful. But

then Mac had been just as strong.

"So you were there. You couldn't erase Westwood's memory?" Stupid question. We have to *touch* a mortal to do that. "Or zap him with your mind control thing?" No one could do a mind-meld like Blade.

"I tried. He wears some kind of protective glasses."

"How did he get Mac? An ambush?" I shut up. If I knew Blade, he was already blaming himself for Mac's death. He had a sense of responsibility a mile wide. Now he'd taken on Mac's widow.

"You could call it that. He knew us well before we sensed the danger. And, God damn him, I couldn't get close to Westwood. He's developed new technology. The glasses and some kind of scanner, a vampire detector."

I hadn't heard Blade this upset since he'd broken things off with his family. And don't ask me to go into that now, it's a long story.

I was shaking and feeling sick again. A vamp detector. This was really, really bad news. I pride myself on my ability to blend in with mortals.

"Are you telling me I could be outed by some kind of ray gun?"

"Mara and I saw his device. It looks like a cell phone, Gloriana. There's no way to know if he's scanning or not until he comes at you. And he's harmless looking.

Average height, build. Check him out on the Internet and print out his picture. Show it to every vampire you know."

Blade spoke to someone in the room with him. Mara?

"I will. As soon as I get to Freddy's."

"Good. But, like I said, you still might not recognize him. He's not roaming around in camouflage and a Mossy Oak cap. He wears those tinted glasses, but they're ordinary too." He was silent for a moment while my mind whirled.

"Damn it, Gloriana, I need you here, where I can protect you."

I let that demand go for the moment. "How ... how did he get Mac?" Garlic and crosses didn't take us out like in some of those legends mortals groove on. But the stake thing was all too true. "I can't see Mac standing still for anyone."

"He didn't. I told you Westwood is a hunter. He's got a bow and arrows made of some exotic wood. Obviously he's a crack shot. An inch or two off and we'd have dragged Mac out of there with us." More conversation with someone else.

"Mara said those arrows smelled funny. She thinks they're olive wood. Use that smell as a warning."

"How did you get away?" Vampire hunting as sport. What next? Vamps stuffed and mounted? Oh, God.

"When it was obvious Mac was lost to us, Mara and I got the hell out of there."

"I'm sorry. I loved Mac too. Poor Mara." I wiped at my eyes.

"Yes, it's hard. I'll say it again. Be careful, Gloriana." Blade sounded tired. Was he feeding? Centuries of caring for someone couldn't just be turned off. Even though I'd certainly tried.

"You weren't wounded, were you?"

"Slightly. I healed."

Slightly. Which could be anything from a nick on the arm to a gut shot. No wonder he sounded tired. Vamps heal when they sleep but it takes a lot out of them.

"Where are you?" Of course Mara was with him and how sick to be jealous of a grieving widow. She was Blade's friend. His *beautiful* friend. With the kind of flaming red hair and green eyes that any Scotsman would kill for. Certainly the Campbells loved her. And she was thin, of course. Next to her I'm an overblown English rose.

"Lake Charles. In Louisiana. I have a casino here. It's just across the Texas border. Forget Austin. You *will* join us. I can protect you here. I've got state-of-the-art security and guards around the clock. Now that we know about Westwood, he won't be able to get near us in the casino."

A casino. Why not just stake me now? I'd never told Blade about my little gambling problem and wasn't about to

now. Being under Blade's protection ... I'd never felt safer than when I was with him.

But he hadn't asked. He'd issued an order. And I quit following his orders over a century ago. Because I also tended to revert to a Glory I didn't particularly like with Blade. Dependent, giving up my power ... Can you tell I read self-help books?

Damn it. Technofreak vamp hunters. No wonder I felt chilled to the bone and more than a little tempted to get to Lake Charles as fast as my aging Suburban could carry me. I sucked it up.

"I'll be with Freddy. He's as strong as you are, maybe stronger." A dig, but baiting Blade beat the full-out crying jag I felt like going for.

"Is Valdez with you?"

I glanced at my dog who was checking out the countryside.

"Of course."

"Keep him close until you get here. You are *not* going to Frederick. I will expect you—"

I hung up on him. Just like that. I turned off the phone before flinging it onto the seat.

"*The big boss givin' ya grief, angel face?*" Valdez. Obviously not your ordinary companion animal.

"He's not my big boss and I'm giving *him* grief." I

grabbed a tissue from the console and blew my nose. "But I know he's *your* big boss. In your next report, tell him to kiss my--"

"Tell him yourself, sweet cheeks. Right now I gotta go."

When Blade and I parted ways, we'd argued until he wore me down and I'd agreed to let him provide protection for me. I'd expected bodyguards. Instead he'd sent dogs. Not ordinary pups, but creatures with special abilities. This was Valdez number one hundred and twenty-five. They had all been willing to give their lives to keep me safe. And they had. These dogs were usually mortal and it broke my heart each time I lost one.

I have no idea how he did it--vamp magic, I guess--but Blade had made each Valdez more powerful, more ... interesting. Besides being able to create a circle of safety around me, the last dozen or so had been able to communicate. Not out loud, but in my head. Impossible to tune out. And impossible to explain in a crowd. That's why we had strict rules about when and where Valdez can speak.

It amuses Blade to surprise me. The last one had sounded just like the Chihuahua in the fast food commercial. This one is a thug, Travolta in *Get Shorty*. What ever happened to the strong silent type?

"You gonna ignore me or what? I don't wanna hear no

whinin' when I lift my leg on your CD player."

"All right. All right." I jerked open the door and hopped out. "Hurry. We're miles from nowhere."

"Don't I know it. Seems okay though." He sniffed his way to a bush and took care of his business. *"Next gas stop, I want a bag of Cheetos and some Twinkies."*

Typical. "I should get you a can of Alpo. That other stuff's bad for you." Can you believe this dog? I think he eats those things to torment me. I haven't had a bite, of food, that is, since 1604 and while I always liked my meals back then, I would have killed for something that smelled like a Cheeto.

"I ain't no ordinary dog. I'm a Labradoodle special and I got needs. You have any idea what they put in canned dog food?"

"Cheetos and Twinkies aren't—"

"So stop for a Big Mac and fries. And you owe me. So far I've listened to Evita, Phantom of the Opera and Oklahoma. And," he gave me a long suffering look, *"you ain't no Chiquita Rivera if you know what I mean."*

"Chita Rivera. Chiquita is the banana." I know my pop culture. It's a survival skill. And, yeah, I knew what he meant. I can dance, and act, but sing? A girl can't do everything perfectly.

"Chill out, fur face. I could go back to 'We are the

Champions'." My fave. And one I knew Valdez was really sick of. I'd heard him howl through it more than once to drown it and me out.

"I thought you were in a hurry." Valdez settled into his seat with a sigh. If he wasn't being so aggravating I'd bury my fingers in his soft fur and scratch his ears. Don't get me wrong. I love dogs. They're great company. Normal dogs anyway. But no way was I letting him eat fries in my car again. Talk about torture. And the delicious smell lingered for *days*.

"I am in a hurry." And I was seriously creeped out and seeing a wild-eyed hunter behind every scraggly bush. I put the car in gear.

"Then get the lead out, Blondie. You got three hours till daylight. And we're not stayin' in no cheap motel with a hard mattress. I've checked it out. Next big town's got several nice places that take dogs."

Like I'd let my dog pick a motel. Though he probably *had* checked it out. I've given up trying to figure out what this Valdez can do. He's part canine, part computer and all weird. And he reports to Blade so he's a damned spy. How? Some kind of mind-meld, I guess. But this Valdez and I have bonded enough that I know he won't rat me out about certain things. Like the gambling problem or the night I stayed out too late and almost got fried in the morning sun. That one

cost me a case of Cocoa Puffs.

Pain in the butt or not though, I feel safe when I have Valdez sacked out on the foot of my bed. I heard a snort and glanced over at him. Did I mention he can read my mind? How irritating is that?

"What?"

He gave me a look and, yeah, I did feel that circle of safety wrap around me like a warm blanket.

"I've got your back, kid. Isn't that worth a Twinkie stop?"

I had to laugh. That voice in my head, big brown eyes and a wagging tail. "Whatever, fur face." We passed a sign. "Twenty-two miles to Twinkieville."

Safe or not, I kept checking my rearview mirror. Hunters are like rabid beasts. There's no reasoning with them. They're convinced vampires are all demons from hell who play Jack the Ripper all night and sleep in coffins all day. How wrong can they be? I prefer a pillow top mattress, Egyptian cotton sheets and Valdez curled up on the foot of the bed.

I sighed and glanced at my faithful companion who kept staring alertly out the window. Blade had never liked a dog in the bedroom. Valdez or Blade? Unfortunately, right now Valdez was the only contender in the sleep-with-Glory contest.